

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT DECEMBER 24, 2001

CHRISTMAS EVE 2001 John M. Buchanan

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery of the bestial floor.

William Butler Yeats
The Magi

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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CHRISTMAS EVE 2001

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Part of the Christmas experience for some people is a kind of low-level frustration resulting from unmet Christmas expectations. The problem is that we have set our sights so high and expect so much of Christmas that it takes a heroic superhuman effort to reach them.

Garrison Keillor talked a few weeks ago on his radio program, *Prairie Home Companion*, about the mothers and grandmothers and aunts, the women, of Lake Wobegon, a mythical Norwegian community in Minnesota. Those women were amazing. As Christmas approached, they became larger than life, marshalling all their resources, strength, endurance, patience, persistence; working from before dawn to late at night; cooking, baking, organizing, cleaning, preparing the house for guests, polishing silver, decorating the tree and the mantle; doing everything. They became Queens of Christmas, Keillor said.

We set our standards high. British poet W. H. Auden, in "A Christmas Oratorio," wrote

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree. . . .

. . . There are enough leftovers for the rest of the week. Not that we have much of an appetite, having drunk such a lot, stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—to love all of our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers.

The modern-day trendsetter, however, when it comes to setting our expectations too high and grossly overestimating our powers is none other than Martha Stewart. *New York Times* writer Judith Shulevitz wrote a piece a few weeks ago, "Martha Stewart Brings Us All Together."

"Martha's dazzling reputation has been tarnished," the writer maintained, "by critics aghast at her transformation of the most routine household chores into acts of domestic theater."

And I recalled a now legendary incident involving a grandmother I know rather well who ordered from Martha's Christmas catalogue a do-it-yourself kit containing the component parts for small, folded paper star tree ornaments. It seemed like the perfect project for the grandmother and her teenaged granddaughter to share at the kitchen counter during a long weekend visit. The package arrived, was opened, and a complicated array of colored paper of varying lengths emerged along with several pages of instructions. And then the work proceeded and continued and continued hour after hour and passersby sensed a little distress at first because this was neither simple nor easy and no paper stars were appearing. And then the stress became frustration, and the next day, when the work began all over again, the frustration somehow transformed into anger, and other family members, tiptoeing past this now explosive scenario, overheard Martha being described in not very flattering terms, terms—if truth were told—that the grandmother and granddaughter do not ordinarily use, terms far too strong for a Christmas Eve sermon.

The *Times* writer continued:

The “Martha by Mail 2001” holiday catalogue is as overstuffed as stockings, with recipes and instructions for making geometric chocolates, professional-looking-ornaments (those paper stars I’ll bet!), fir draped fireplaces and glistening banquets of prime rib and Yorkshire pudding served on the best silver. The very over-the-top-ness of Martha’s productions testifies to her deep understanding of the holiday. Christmas has always been a time for extremes.

Perhaps we could do ourselves a big favor by lowering expectations, reducing our efforts a bit, our determination to make everything perfect. It doesn’t have to be as organized and neat and glistening as a Martha Stewart catalogue. Because the event we are aspiring to celebrate wasn’t that way at all. I’m not sure even Martha Stewart could organize the birth of Jesus. It was unanticipated, unexpected, unruly, unorganized, and generally chaotic.

The way Luke tells it, Mary and Joseph had been traveling for a week or so, to return to Joseph’s home village for some kind of Roman census. On the very night they arrived in Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem, Mary, who was very pregnant, went into labor. So they tried to find a place in the inn. But the inn was already full. The innkeeper offered the shelter of his stable out back, and there, surrounded by the sounds and smells and warmth of donkeys and cows, perhaps a few cats and a dog, the baby was born. They wrapped him in the customary way with the bands of soft cloth she had brought along for this purpose and, because there was no alternative, placed their newborn son in the cow’s feedbox in the manger.

That, modest, simple drama, Luke maintains, is no less than God coming into human history. That baby, Luke maintains—along with Matthew, Mark, and John and Paul and Timothy and Barnabus and Peter and Andrew and the early Christian church—that amazing phenomenon that essentially overturned and replaced the Roman Empire, that baby—all those people and uncouthed billions of human beings since have concluded—was the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us.

Do you understand how absolutely astonishing that claim is? Jesus, child of Bethlehem, man of Nazareth, God with us?

It flies in the face not only of Martha Stewart’s holiday catalogue, but also the very best thinking the human race has produced. Ever since we emerged from our caves and looked up into the night sky, we human beings have sensed that we are not alone in the universe. Ever since we began to think and reason, we have had this singular thought: “There is something more than me.” And so we have devoted our very best intellectual and artistic imagination to the project. Our philosophers have pondered, “If we are not alone, if there is something or someone out there, that someone must be very powerful, all powerful in fact, and very smart, all knowing, in fact. Omnipotent and omniscient seem like good words to describe him or her or it.” And the philosophers continued: “The supreme being must be a lot more than we are, not be limited as we are, not affected by worry and anxiety and not susceptible to the clear weaknesses of our flesh,

like hunger and thirst, or joy and gladness, for that matter. God to be God must be high and holy and remote and removed.” “The Unmoved Mover,” one of those philosophers, Aristotle, said.

And here comes Luke with his story of a baby born in Bethlehem. That baby, Luke says, Christian faith says, that baby and the man he became is all we can know about God.

I suppose the most troubling aspect of the September 11 experience for most of us, after the immediate revulsion at the assault on our nation and our fellow citizens traveling on airplanes, working in offices, and after the grief and anger at the perpetrators—afterward the troubling dimension of it all was theological.

How, in God’s good name, could people do this? How could people use the name of God to kill other innocent people? And immediately behind that quandary, other questions: Where is God in this tragedy? Why did God do this or allow this? And as I heard the questions, and was asked the questions, and tried to answer the questions, tried to put into words the 2000-year-old witness of my faith, my church, I kept thinking ahead to Christmas, to Christmas Eve and its reminders that God came into the world in Bethlehem, in a humble, human birth; that God came into a world of injustice and suffering and violence not as a conquering military leader, not as an emperor or even a brilliant philosopher. God came in this way, this most humble, most vulnerable birth. God chose to live our lives, to be born as we are born, to experience our life as we live it, even to die our death. And the point of it all? To show us how deeply and dearly we are loved. To show us that God is not what we expected: high, holy, remote, inaccessible, righteous, angry. To show us that God is love.

And to show us, as we live into the future, that we can expect God’s coming, God’s birth, in anything that is beautifully and simply human: the birth of a baby, kindness extended, heroism, sacrifice demonstrated by ordinary people, love shared, ecstasy experienced, passion felt.

I suppose we all come here on Christmas Eve for different reasons and with different expectations. Some I know are here because this is what you’re supposed to do on Christmas Eve. And some are here because we’re separated from our families and dear ones and church is a good place to spend an hour or so. And some are here to listen to the story and hear the music and because 2001 seems like a particularly good year to light a candle.

And my hope, as we listen to the story and sing the carols, is that we will hear again an invitation to open our hearts, our minds, our lives to the stunning proposition that in the child of Bethlehem God was born among us.

I heard a lovely story recently about an incident that happened during the Christmas Eve Pageant at New York’s Riverside Church a few years ago. The pageant had come to the point at which the innkeeper is supposed to turn away Mary and Joseph with the resounding line, “There’s no room in the inn.”

We’ve all imagined that moment when he turns Mary and Joseph away and they turn around and trudge off into the darkness. The part of the innkeeper was perfect and it was a perfect single line

for Tim, a young man in the congregation who has Down Syndrome. Tim had practiced his line over and over with his parents and the pageant director until he had it.

The big moment arrived. There he was, standing in the front of the church as Mary and Joseph slowly made their way down the center aisle. They approached, knocked on the door, and said their lines. Tim's parents, the director, the whole audience leaned forward almost willing him to remember his line.

"There's no room in the inn" Tim boomed out, perfectly.

But then, as Mary and Joseph turned on cue to travel further, Tim suddenly yelled, "Wait!" They turned back, startled, and looked at him in surprise.

"You can stay at my house," he called. (See Marian Wright Edelman, *Still No Room In the Inn*.)

It is what this evening most authentically means: an occasion to invite him into your home, your life, your heart.

Amen.